United States Senate

November 15, 2022

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Majority Leader
United States Senate

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
United States Senate

The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Chairman
Committee on Appropriations

The Honorable Richard Shelby
Vice Chairman
Committee on Appropriations

Dear Majority Leader Schumer, Minority Leader McConnell, Chairman Leahy, and Vice Chairman Shelby:

We write you to ask that Congress provide the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) $5 billion for rooftop solar and storage solutions for low-income households and households with people with disabilities in Puerto Rico in an emergency supplemental appropriations bill. Puerto Rico's electrical infrastructure continues to yield island-wide blackouts and frequent long-term outages, despite skyrocketing energy prices on the island, including seven price increases in recent months. Those most impacted by natural disasters must be first in line for relief.

For too long, the people of Puerto Rico have been deprived of a reliable, resilient, and sustainable energy utility. The urgent need for this resource has been made exceptionally clear after multiple natural disasters that have recently impacted Puerto Rico, including Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017, several earthquakes in 2020, and now Hurricane Fiona. Each of these disasters caused a devastating loss of life, extensive structural damage, and the total failure of the territory's centralized power grid. Each time there is such a mass grid collapse, Puerto Rico's more than three million residents are left wondering how long it will last, and communities in the past have remained in the dark for several weeks or, in some cases after Hurricane Maria, months. Without power, businesses cannot operate, hospitals lack the resources to treat patients, schools must shut down, and residents are unable to carry out basic tasks for survival, such as keeping food and medication cool, powering essential medical equipment, or boiling water to remove contaminants when access to safe drinking water is scarce. Dependable energy undergirds a functioning economy. Low-income households and those with disabilities feel the impacts first and worst.

Efforts to modernize the power grid have seen limited success, impeded for years by recurring delays in project submissions and approvals, technological failures, the persistence of the electric generation authority's multi-billion-dollar debt, and a general lack of coordination between the entities responsible for developing Puerto Rico's electrical system and disaster resiliency. These obstacles prolong Puerto Rico's dependency on an outdated and fossil fuel-reliant grid, further deterring progress toward the territory's renewable energy goals: 40% electricity generation from

renewables by 2025 and 100% by 2050.[1] Currently, only 3% of Puerto Rico's energy is supplied from renewable sources.[2] Further, although billions of dollars have been allocated towards aiding Puerto Rico in its recovery and resiliency-building, including $28 billion in Public Assistance funds from FEMA over the past five years and more than $20 billion provided by Congress to invest Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) in local communities, only a handful of permanent work projects have been completed and only a fraction of these funds have been expended by the government of Puerto Rico.[3]

In hopes that a private company would address historically abysmal service and high electricity bills, Puerto Rico privatized management of the grid to LUMA Energy, LLC (LUMA). Since they took over in 2021, they have failed to meet their own performance benchmarks and have overseen an increase in the duration of power outages.

For these reasons and more, the market for rooftop solar and batteries is among the most active in the country. But a new residential solar panel and battery storage system costs about $25,000, while the median household income Puerto Rico is just over $21,000.[4] Those without the means to buy or finance them are getting left behind. For many people in Puerto Rico, energy independence is a survival strategy, and it's out of reach for those that need it most.

A preliminary study from the National Renewable Energy Laboratory's (NREL) PR100 program suggests that Puerto Rico's high exposure to sunlight could potentially provide energy well in excess of current needs from rooftop solar power.[5] The record of reliability of solar power in Puerto Rico, especially during a crisis is excellent and growing. Amidst the island-wide blackout caused by Hurricane Fiona, households and businesses equipped for solar-powered generation and storage fared much better than those who were reliant on the centralized grid. For example, Sunnova Energy, a residential solar installation company, reported that 97% of its customers had access to electricity after the storm.[6] Nonprofit organizations, which have largely led and subsidized projects to install rooftop solar and battery storage systems in Puerto Rico, continue to share that their efforts have allowed critical services like hospitals and fire stations to continue operating and have provided residents with access to power while the island's grid continues to be repaired.[7]

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[1] SB 1121 Puerto Rico Energy Public Policy Act, p. 23. The law also requires the closing of all coal-fired electrical generation by 2028.

[2] U.S. Energy Information Administration, Puerto Rico – Territory Profile and Energy Estimates , December 16, 2021, https://www.eia.gov/state/analysis.php?sid=RQ.

[3] Government Accountability Office, Chris Currie, Director, Homeland Security and Justice, "Update on FEMA's Disaster Recovery Efforts in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands," September 15, 2022. https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-22-106211.pdf

[4] Espada, Mariah. Solar Power is Helping Some Puerto Rico Homes Avoid Hurricane Fiona Blackouts. September 20, 2022. Time. https://time.com/6215138/solar-power-puerto-rico-hurricane-fiona/ .

[5] The National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL), Puerto Rico Low-to-Moderate Income Rooftop PV and Solar Savings Potential, December 17, 2020. https://www.nrel.gov/docs/fy21osti/78756.pdf

[6] Maria Gallucci, Canary Media, "Puerto Rico's Solar Users Are Still Among 'Fortunate Few' With Power," September 23, 2022. https://www.canarymedia.com/articles/solar/most-puerto-ricans-still-in-the-dark-afterhurricane-fiona

[7] Id.

Nonprofits cannot bear the responsibility of developing Puerto Rico's solar energy generation capacity alone. We respectfully request your support in asking that Congress provide $5 billion to the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) through emergency supplemental appropriations to provide rooftop solar and battery storage systems for low-income households and households with individuals with disabilities throughout Puerto Rico.

Sincerely,

Robert Menendez
United States Senator

Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator

Cory A. Booker
United States Senator

Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

Bernard Sanders
United States Senator

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator

Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator

Christopher S. Murphy
United States Senator

Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator

Martin Heinrich
United States Senator

Tim Kaine
United States Senator